

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

An absence of five weeks, in a foreign country which one is visiting for the first time, is not for me the best preparation for replacing the Editor of the News-Letter even for one number. To receive no correspondence, to be unable to read the newspapers, and to see English papers only several days after publication, arouses a feeling of ignorance about events at home which persists for some time after return. The recent statement issued by the Joint Committee of "Religion and Life" and "The Sword of the Spirit" is one which calls for comment in these columns: but as a member of that committee, and moreover as one who was unable to attend the meetings immediately preceding the issue of the statement, I am not the best person to introduce the discussion. And as for affairs in Sweden, I cannot supplement what you have already been told by the Bishop of Chichester. I must turn to events which have taken place in my absence, or soon after my return, which I have not yet had the opportunity of discussing with those who are better informed than myself.

EDUCATION AND THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Liberal Education Advisory Committee on post-war education has just published its report under the title of "Education for All"; and the Labour Party Conference has discussed a resolution on educational reform. The Labour Party does not appear to have so far published any document: we must also await a statement from the Conservative Party before drawing our conclusions. But the field covered, and the recommendations made, by Liberal and Labour, are so similar as to provoke comment even at this stage.

It is certainly desirable that the political parties should give increased attention to the problems of education, and that they should state their official views about reforms to be made. Our first feeling is certain to be one of satisfaction at finding so much agreement. If all parties agree upon certain principles and consequently upon certain reforms, the problems of education (we believe) will be considered in an atmosphere clear of the passions of party politics. It would be intolerable if educational policy were to be reversed with every change of government: it is most regrettable (as was mentioned in the course of the discussion in Committee of the House of Commons) that the Presidency of the Board of Education should have changed hands so often in the past during the tenure of one government. Everyone must desire continuity of policy. But there are obscure dangers in agreement upon programme, even as there is obvious mischief in lack of continuity. It would certainly be deplorable if there were not many points of reform upon which everyone was in accord: there are changes the desirability, even the necessity, of which no one could question. That teachers should neither be overworked nor underpaid, that the number of pupils in the classroom should be smaller, are instances of such obvious reasonableness that they need no examination. Yet, if a political party has a political philosophy at all—if it is something more than an aggregation of interests—we may find it surprising that this political philosophy should have no bearing whatever upon its educational policy. An absence of important differences might be taken to mean that education was an area beyond politics—or, to be more precise, that we were all

united upon certain principles, and that our divergences only began in more limited departments of their application. Or it might mean that we tacitly conspired to ignore all differences of principle. It might mean, not that education was above political issues, but that it was treated as something not worth making an issue of; that the common proposals consisted rather of such as seemed likely to commend themselves to the electorate than of common conclusions from common principles; and that the parties were, so to speak, paired off (if three can pair off) for a division which would not take place. If we are to be truly non-party in our educational reforms, it is not enough to confine our programme to the points on which we have no trouble in agreeing. There is always the possibility that a point of view which has not appeared in the formulae, which has not even been consciously recognized, may come into operation when the programme is applied; and that a common programme, which appears to be only a formulation of what the public appears at the moment to want, may become a very different thing in the hands of politicians of different political allegiance. I am not saying that this is what is happening, but only that it is always a danger to be intelligently faced.

It is not that I am objecting to any of the detailed proposals of either the Liberal or the Labour Party—so far as I have understood them. There are phrases, certainly, which leave much to the imagination. It is not immediately clear, for instance, what fruit the Liberal conception of the public school, as “an integral part of the national system,” would bear, or what the “common code of regulations” which the Labour Party would impose upon all schools for children over eleven would comprehend (why not for schools for children under eleven?). But I do not wish to fiddle with questions like these; and there are others, such as that of the standardization of the school-leaving age, which demand more professional knowledge and experience than I possess. What is striking is the apparent assumption by both parties—and there seems no reason to expect that the Conservative view will be any different—of a quantitative rather than a qualitative standard. That is to say, the assumption that education is a commodity with the nature of which we are all familiar; that it is sometimes offered in an adulterated form, and that the conditions in the factories are not always satisfactory; but that the chief problem is a shortage in the market and inefficient distribution—that the chief problem is to provide more of it for more people. This is indeed a problem, but it is not the only one.

THE OTHER PROBLEM

In our zeal for social justice we must not forget that a society is something more than the total number of people living in the same place at the same time and talking the same language: it is something which has a past and a future. It is an organic growth, the future of which is directed by its past. A common notion during modern times has been that people could be divided into those whose care was to preserve, and those whose interest was to initiate—the former being conservatives and the latter radicals. The usual weakness of the radical has been, not that he only looks ahead, but that he does not look ahead far enough: the usual fault of the conservative, not that he looks back, but that he keeps his eyes shut. If we look at the matter in this way, we will be aware of cultural values to be preserved—not out of sentimental piety towards the past, but out of solicitude for the future. The idea that there may be cultural values worth preserving, and that these values may not inevitably be able to look after themselves, does not seem to take a prominent place in our views of educational reform. One example of the way in which they are affected appears in the course of the discussion in Committee of the House of Commons—a discussion conducted on a commendably high level. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Education observed: “Let us be sure of this, that if classics are to remain one of the essential subjects there will be no recruitment from the elementary schools into the public schools.” Now this raises the question (which was not discussed) whether it is or is not a bad thing, from the point of view of

classical scholarship, that boys should postpone elementary Latin and Greek until the age of entering public schools ; the question whether classical scholarship matters ; the question whether Latin should be taught in elementary schools ; the question whether it matters more that the standards of classical scholarship should be maintained, or that access from elementary schools to public schools should be encouraged. I am not asserting confidently that I know the answers to these questions : only that they are questions to be considered before we make our plans for reform. I hope that we shall not consciously or unconsciously drift towards the view that it is better for everybody to have a second-rate education, than for only a small minority to have the best. For the first problem of education, surely, is to elaborate, preserve and develop the best education for the superior minority. The second problem is that of the selection of the minority to receive it. I say the second problem, because I think it is better that the best education should be given to an ill-chosen minority than that it should not be given at all.

THE MEANING OF THE WORD

A point which was made by several speakers during the discussion in the House of Commons (16th June) was that responsibilities properly within the province of the Board of Education were at present undertaken by other ministries. Apart from the technical training of the Army, Navy and Air Force (which was not in question) and the war-time organizations for the entertainment and general education of the troops (which were not mentioned) there are branches administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Mines. It was argued from several sides—and as the contention was not contested, I accept it—that these departments of education should be brought within the control of the Board : it was even suggested that the Board of Education should be converted into a “ Ministry for Youth and Education.”

Certainly from the point of view of those who like to preserve the meanings of words, the change has much to recommend it. The term “ education ” has undergone a vast extension of meaning in the last hundred years : the number of possible pictures of actual human beings being variously trained, which the word can suggest, must be immensely greater than the number which it could have suggested to the minds of our great-grandfathers. In this extension of meaning there is always the danger of some loss as well : a word which is coming to connote the provision of milk and dental attention may become too fatigued by its extra duties to include conversation with the best minds of the ancient world.

It is worth while also, perhaps, to enquire how this process has come about. We readily persuade ourselves that a relative improvement is an absolute good : and that what is, to a large degree, worthy of approval as making the best of a bad job, is really a step towards a millennial condition. The best recommendation of democracy is perhaps to be found, not in its actual or potential achievements, but in the failures and misdemeanours of despots and oligarchs. Similarly, the pressure towards extension of the domain of “ education ” has come largely from the break-down of previous ways of life. We are sometimes told by dieticians that a people which eats the right food has very little need of dentists. But it is easier to develop dental science to its present perfection than to alter people's way of life so as to provide them with the right food ; and when the teeth of a people have become as perishable as English teeth commonly are, the only step possible is to provide dentistry in the schools and ultimately perhaps in adult education institutions. In admiring the progress of dentistry we can still regret that we have not better teeth ; and in admiring the limitless scope of education we may in some particulars regret its necessity. An ideal society, we may remember, would not be one in which the State controlled the activity of all of its members from birth to the grave, but one in which such control was unnecessary. Our concern about religious education is increased by the knowledge that the majority of children get little or nothing in that way at home : an exceptionally devout, able, instructed and popular teacher can do something to repair the ravages caused by the lack of moderately devout, intelligent, instructed

and affectionate parents. The necessity for care and supervision of youths in the group fourteen to eighteen (and a crying necessity it appears to be) has a great deal to do with an industrial system which may or may not be the best possible, with the loss of apprenticeship, with the absence of employments the learning and practice of which is itself of educational value, with the lack of any social shape to the communities of to-day whether industrial or agricultural. I am not able to suggest any one remedy for this state of affairs which would alleviate the burden, likely to become heavier, of future Presidents of the Board of Education—or the burden on everybody, and a heavy burden it is for most human beings, of having to struggle for many years of life with the impositions of formal instruction and training. I only suggest that in this vast blooming, buzzing confusion we should still maintain sight of that kind of education which would be necessary even in the most perfect society: the training of the superior few to superior wisdom and even to holiness.

EDUCATION AND CULTURE

While education has a potent influence in shaping the culture of a nation, it is itself shaped by that culture, upon which in turn other influences play. We cannot rely upon educational development alone to improve the quality of our culture, or even to arrest its decay when it is decaying. In a recent correspondence in *The Times* concerned with the increased addiction to astrology and divination—always a tendency in times of stress—Mr. Tom Harrisson has an interesting letter in which he refers to this addiction as “symptomatic of the wide decline in spirituality over the past decades.” I cannot share the confidence of a later correspondent who finds the cure for astrology in Adult Education. Adult Education might equip people for preparing their own horoscopes, or it might replace superstition with a shallow rationalism: it all depends upon what people want their education for. The majority of readers of this News-Letter may not be habitual readers of sensational fiction; and so may be surprised by my suggesting that the lower levels of fiction may sometimes provide better clues to contemporary morals and manners than those with greater literary pretensions. Between the novels of such writers as Rider Haggard and Anthony Hope, and the popular fiction of the 1920's, a deterioration had already taken place: I have in mind a series of which the hero was a demobilized officer, of prodigious physique, courage and resourcefulness, whose attitude towards women was always impeccably chivalrous, but who sometimes employed rather brutal methods for noble ends. Since that time, the chivalry has tended to disappear: I have in mind a much more recent series of novels, which incline me to believe that the history of gangster warfare in Chicago, and subsequently that of German outrages, have contributed to a further blunting of the public sensibility. To attempt to suppress this sort of literature would be silly: but to ignore it would be obtuse.

Yours sincerely,

T. S. Eliot

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